

III

Should we conclude that such a lie is the very essence of art? I would maintain, on the contrary, that the attitudes I have spoken of up until now are only lies to the extent that they have very little to do with art. So what is art? Nothing simple, that is certain. And it is even more difficult to understand that idea amid the cries of so many people who are fiercely determined to simplify everything. On the one hand, we desire that genius be grand and solitary; on the other hand, we call upon it to resemble everyone. Alas! Reality is more complex. And Balzac sums it up perfectly in one sentence: "Genius resembles everyone but no one resembles genius." It is the same for art, which is nothing without real-

ity and without which reality has little meaning. How, in fact, could art do without reality and how could it be subservient to it? Artists choose their purpose as much as they are chosen by that purpose. In a certain way, art is a revolt against the world in that it encompasses what is fleeting and unfinished: art does not, therefore, take on anything more than the purpose of giving another shape to a reality that it is, nevertheless, constrained to conserve, because reality is the source of art's emotion. In this respect, we are all realists and no one is a realist. Art is neither total rejection nor total acceptance of what is. It is both rejection and acceptance, at one and the same time, and that is why it can be continually and perpetually torn apart. Artists always find themselves dealing with this ambiguity, incapable of rejecting what is real, yet still devoted to challenging the ever-unfinished aspects of reality. To paint a still life, a painter and an apple must confront and adjust to each other. And if their shapes are nothing without the light of the world, those shapes, in turn, add

to that light. The real world, which gives life to bodies and statues through its splendor, also receives another source of light that mirrors the light from the sky. Great style thus lies midway between artists and their objects.

It is therefore not a matter of knowing whether art should flee from reality or subjugate itself to it, but only the precise extent to which a work of art should weigh itself down in reality, so that it does not disappear into the clouds or, on the contrary, drag itself around in leaden shoes. All artists must find the solution to this problem according to their sensitivities and abilities. The greater an artist's revolt against the reality of the world, the greater the weight of that reality needed to counterbalance it. But that weight can never overpower the unique requirements of the artist.

Just as in Greek tragedy, Melville, Tolstoy, or Molière, the greatest work of art will always be the one that balances reality and the rebellion that mankind places in opposition to that reality, each causing a mutual and endless resurgence

within each other, a resurgence that is the very definition of joyful yet heartbreaking life. Every now and then, a new world emerges, a world that is different from our everyday world, yet the same, unique but universal, full of innocent insecurity, born for a brief moment thanks to the strength and dissatisfaction of the genius. It *is* something and yet it is *not* something—the world is nothing and the world is everything. Such is the dual, tireless cry of all true artists, the cry that keeps them standing, eyes wide open, and that, from time to time, awakens in everyone, deep within the heart of this sleepy world, the insistent yet fleeting image of a reality that we recognize without having ever experienced it.

In the same way, artists faced by their times can neither turn away from nor become lost in them. If they turn away, they are speaking in a void. But, on the other hand, to the extent to which they accept reality as an object, they affirm their own existence as a subject, and will not completely subjugate themselves to it. To

put it another way, it is at the very moment when artists choose to share the fate of everyone that they affirm their own individuality. And they cannot escape this paradox. Artists take from history what they can see or suffer themselves, directly or indirectly, that is to say, current events (in the strictest sense of those words) as well as what is happening to people alive today, and not the relationship between current events and a future that is unknowable to the living artist. Judging contemporary people in the name of those who do not yet exist is the role of prophecy. True artists can only value the dreams proposed to them in relation to their effects on the living. A prophet, priest, or politician can judge absolutely, and moreover, as we well know, they do not refrain from doing so. But artists cannot. If they judged absolutely, they would classify the nuances of reality as either good or evil, with nothing in between, thus creating melodrama.

The goal of art, on the contrary, is not to establish rules or to reign; it is first and foremost to understand. Art does sometimes reign, but

precisely because it has achieved understanding. But no magnificent work of art has ever been founded on hatred or contempt. That is why artists, as they reach the end of their personal journeys, give absolution instead of condemning. They are not judges, simply justifiers. Artists are the perpetual defenders of living creatures, precisely because those creatures are alive. They truly advocate to love whoever is close by right now, and not those far in the future, which is what debases contemporary humanism, turning it into a catechism of the courthouse. Quite the reverse: a great work of art ends up baffling all the judges. At the same time, through such great works, artists give homage to the finest example of humankind and bow down to the worst criminals. As Oscar Wilde wrote from prison: "There is not a single man among these unfortunate people locked up with me in this miserable place who does not have a symbolic relationship with the secret of life." Yes, and that secret of life coincides with the secret of art.

For 150 years, the writers of consumer soci-

ety, with very few exceptions, believed they could live in blissful irresponsibility. They did live, in fact, and then died alone, just as they had lived. But we, the writers of the twentieth century, will no longer ever be alone. Quite the contrary: we must know that we cannot hide away from communal misery, and that our sole justification, if one exists, is to speak out, as best we can, for those who cannot. And we must do this for everyone who is suffering at this very moment, despite the past or future greatness of the states or political parties that are oppressing them: to artists, there are no privileged torturers. That is why beauty, even today, especially today, can serve no political party; it only serves, in the long or short term, the pain or freedom of humankind. The only committed artists are those who, without refusing to take up arms, at least refuse to join the regular army, that is, they refuse to become snipers. And so, the lesson artists learn from beauty, if it is honestly learned, is not the lesson of egotism but of solid brotherhood. When conceived in this way,

beauty has never enslaved anyone. Quite the opposite. On every day, at every moment, for thousands of years, beauty has consoled millions of people in their servitude, and, sometimes, even freed some of them forever.

In the end, perhaps we are here touching upon the greatness of art, in the perpetual tension between beauty and pain, human love and the madness of creation, unbearable solitude and the exhausting crowd, rejection and consent. Art develops between two chasms: frivolity and propaganda. Along the high ridge where great artists keep moving forward, every step is dangerous, extremely risky. Yet it is within that risk, and only there, that true artistic freedom lies. A difficult kind of freedom that seems more like an ascetic discipline? What artist would deny that? What artist would dare claim to be equal to that endless task? Such freedom assumes a healthy mind and body, a style that would reveal a strength of the soul and patient defiance. Like all freedom, it is a never-ending risk, a grueling experience, and that is why today we flee from

such risk, just as we flee from freedom, which demands so much of us, and instead, rush headlong into all kinds of enslavement, to at least obtain some comfort in our souls.

But if art is not a dangerous adventure, then what is it, and what is its justification? No, free artists cannot enjoy comfort any more than free people can. Free artists are those who, with great difficulty, create order themselves. The more chaos they must bring order to, the stricter their rules will be, and the more they will have affirmed their freedom. Gide said something that I have always agreed with, even though it might be misunderstood: "Art lives from constraint and dies from freedom." That is true, but we must not draw the conclusion that art should be controlled. Art only lives through the constraints it places upon itself: it dies from any others. On the other hand, if art does not control itself, it descends into madness and is enslaved by its own illusions. The most liberated form of art, and the most rebellious, will thus be the most enduring; it will glorify the greatest effort.

If a society and its artists do not accept this long, liberating task, if they yield to the comforts of entertainment or conformity, to the diversions of art for art's sake or the moralizing of realistic art, its artists will remain entrenched in nihilism and sterility. Saying this means that a rebirth in art today depends on our courage and our desire to see clearly.

Yes, that rebirth is in all our hands. It is up to us if the West is to inspire resisters to the new Alexander the Greats who must once more secure the Gordian knot of civilization that has been torn apart by the power of the sword. To accomplish this, we must all run every risk and work to create freedom. It is not a question of knowing whether, while seeking justice, we will manage to preserve freedom. It *is* a question of knowing that without freedom, we will accomplish nothing, but will lose, simultaneously, future justice and the beauty of the past. Freedom alone can save humankind from isolation, and isolation in its many forms encourages servitude. But art, because of the inherent freedom

that is its very essence, as I have tried to explain, unites, wherever tyranny divides. So how could it be surprising that art is the chosen enemy of every kind of oppression? How could it be surprising that artists and intellectuals are the primary victims of modern tyrannies, whether they are right-wing or left-wing? Tyrants know that great works embody a force for emancipation that is only mysterious to those who do not worship art. Every great work of art makes humanity richer and more admirable, and that is its only secret. And even thousands of concentration camps and prison cells cannot obliterate this deeply moving testimony to dignity. That is why it is not true that we could, even temporarily, set culture aside in order to prepare a new form of culture. It is impossible to set aside the endless testimony of human misery and greatness, impossible to stop breathing. Culture does not exist without its heritage, and we cannot, and must not, reject our own, the culture of the West. Whatever the great works of art of the future might be, they will all contain

the same secret, forged by courage and freedom, nourished by the daring of thousands of artists from every century and every nation. Yes, when modern tyrannies point out that artists, even when confined to their profession, are the public enemy, they are right. But they also pay homage, through the artist, to an image of humankind that nothing, up until now, has had the power to destroy.

My conclusion will be simple. It suffices to say, in the very midst of the sound and fury of our times: "rejoice." Rejoice, indeed, at having witnessed the death of a comfortable, deceitful Europe, and at facing cruel truths. Rejoice as people, because a lie that lasted for a long time has crumbled, and we can now clearly see what is threatening us. And rejoice as artists, awakened from our sleep and cured of our deafness, so we are forced to face misery, prisons, and bloodshed. If, in the presence of that spectacle, we can preserve the memory of those days and faces, and if, on the contrary, seeing the beauty of the world, we can always remember those who

were humiliated, then Western art will gradually regain its strength and its majesty. Surely, throughout history, there are few examples of artists who faced such difficult problems. But it is precisely because even the simplest words and phrases are weighed in terms of freedom and bloodshed that the artist learns to use them with careful consideration. Danger leads to becoming exemplary, and every type of greatness, in the end, has its roots in taking risks.

The days of irresponsible artists are over. We will miss the brief moments of happiness they brought us. But at the same time, we will recognize that this ordeal has given us the possibility of being truthful, and we will accept that challenge. Freedom in art is worth very little when it has no meaning other than assuring that the artist has an easy life. For a value, or a virtue, to take root in any society, we must not lie about it, which means we must pay for it, at every possible moment. If freedom has become dangerous, then it is on the verge of no longer being prostituted. And I could not, for example, agree with

people today who complain about the decline of wisdom. Apparently, they are right. But, in truth, wisdom has never declined as much as at those times when it was a pleasure without risks to a handful of humanists who had their heads buried in books. But today, when wisdom finally must face real dangers, there is a chance, on the contrary, for it to once again stand tall, once again be respected.

It is said that Nietzsche, after he parted from Lou Salomé, descended into irrevocable loneliness, simultaneously crushed and exalted at the idea of the immense work of art he would have to undertake with no help, and that at night, he would walk in the mountains that overlooked the Gulf of Genoa, lighting great fires of leaves and branches that he would watch burn and disappear. I have often thought about those fires and sometimes imagined certain people and certain works of art standing in front of them, to test them. Well, our age is one of those fires whose indefensible flames will probably reduce many great works of art to ashes! But the works

that survive will remain strong and intact, and when describing them, we will be able, without hesitation, to revel in that supreme joy of the intelligence we call "admiration."

We may hope, of course, as I do, for smaller flames, a moment of respite, a pause that will allow us to dream again. But perhaps there is no peace for an artist other than the peace found in the heat of combat. "Every wall is a door," Emerson rightly said. Do not seek the door, or the way out anywhere but in the wall that surrounds us. On the contrary, let us seek respite wherever it exists, that is, in the very heart of the battle. For in my opinion, and this is where I will conclude, *that* is where respite can be found. It is said that great ideas come to the world on the wings of a dove. And so, perhaps, if we listen closely, amid the din of empires and nations, we might hear the faint sound of beating wings, the sweet stirrings of life and hope. Some will say that such hope is carried by a nation, others by a person. But I believe quite the reverse: hope is awakened, given life, sustained, by the millions

of individuals whose deeds and actions, every day, break down borders and refute the worst moments in history, to allow the truth—which is always in danger—to shine brightly, even if only fleetingly, the truth, which every individual builds for us all, created out of suffering and joy.